
New Opportunities for Public Policy

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The theme “New Governance for a New Rural Economy: Reinventing Public and Private Institutions” is quite apropos; and this discussion—“New Opportunities for Public Policy”—could not be more timely and relevant, when this nation and, indeed, the entire world are facing some of the most grievous challenges and exciting opportunities ever known to mankind. This period in our history certainly causes us to reflect on the time that Charles Dickens described in his book *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859. In the chapter titled “The Period,” Dickens made the following observation:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

We are faced with a similar period; however, it is much more sophisticated, with the potential for much greater positive and negative consequences from our individual and collective behaviors than Charles Dickens could have imagined. We are fortunate; however, in that, to a great extent, we can exercise control of the period, based on the efficacy of our public policies. Many of us share the view that few, if any, positive and sustainable outcomes

happen by chance or accident—notwithstanding an old and hopefully outdated theory that suggests that careers/occupations are selected by accident.

If we, for a moment, subscribe to the notion that desirable, sustainable outcomes must be intentional, then there are significant implications and opportunities for public policy and a definite role for public officials to form public policies that encourage, facilitate, and promote equity and sustainability in our society, nation, and the world. I suspect that there are some individuals who are convinced that to paraphrase Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*: “an invisible hand” should guide policy to the same extent that Smith thought that “an invisible hand” would guide the economy and all would acquire wealth.

We do not share the belief that some invisible hand or no hand at all—meaning little or no local, state, or federal governmental involvement—will result in the application of policies that will foster equitability and sustainability in our society, nation, and the world. Rather, we believe, to paraphrase Plato’s writing about law in *Plato: The Republic* that a “policy” is supreme and good because it is just and an unjust policy is no policy at all. Many of us subscribe to the view of Stephen R. Covey—as conveyed in his bestseller book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—“that any worthwhile” thing created by man was created twice, first in the mind and then physically.”

If my basic premise is policies that result in equitable and sustainable outcomes must be

intentional, then we can appreciate the urgency with which we are compelled to exploit new opportunities for public policy. The opportunities are great because the challenges are mind-boggling. As Napoleon Hill taught in his classic bestseller *Think and Grow Rich*, published in 1937, “every challenge or problem is accompanied by an equal or equivalent opportunity—just need to know where to look for the opportunity.”

What are the excruciating, current, and emerging challenges that provide new opportunities for public policy? They are numerous—at the local, regional, state, national, and global levels. Since the theme of the conference is “New Governance for a New Rural Economy: Reinventing Public and Private Institutions;” and my particular assignment is on “New Opportunities for Public Policy,” I will focus primarily on public policies that could foster economic development in rural communities. This topic is of particular interest to me because my institution, Alcorn State University (ASU), is located in a “real” rural community. Our approximately 3,300 students and approximately 650 employees together have a population that is seven times larger than the population in the 14-mile radius community (Lorman) in which the university is located. Rural means that the Lorman (Alcorn State) campus is 35 miles from the closest McDonald’s or Burger King and 15 miles from the closest bank.

Furthermore, the university is the largest employer in a 45-mile radius and serves as the epicenter for the community. You can see why I have become a student of rural development. Among the challenges affecting rural communities, which beg for effective public policies are: 1) education and workforce training programs, 2) public transportation (e.g., highways, roads, or farm roads), 3) communication (information technology) and land-use planning (zoning), 4) industrial parks, 5) housing, health care, and recreational facilities, 6) human resource development—leadership and management, and 7) crime prevention. These issues or factors and associated

deficiencies affect rural communities and community and economic development in these areas.

In fact, one of my first actions on being appointed president of the university was to designate the institution as a “communiversity,” academically strong and community-oriented. It was clear to me that if the rural communities that are served by the university are to experience sustainable community and economic development, the communiversity has to be a real partner with those communities—not just a traditional “catalyst for change” that effectuates change, but also remains unchanged. Rather, the communiversity has to be a dynamic learning and growing partner with the communities—being pro-active, as well as responding to their needs.

We could say then that a new public policy was initiated at the communiversity, whereby the communities knew that the institution is there to serve them, not simply to confer degrees. While the state university makes programs and services available to all residents of the state, including elected officials, the institution, by local public policy, cannot receive financial support directly from county governments, even though community colleges are able to and do receive substantial financial support from such governments. This suggests an opportunity for a public policy change. It would be of interest to determine if this is a common phenomenon. Four-year institutions in rural communities contribute significantly to the economies of their communities through direct expenditures, as well as through the multiplier effects. Therefore, public policy should enable such institutions to have access to public funds that are accessible to other higher education institutions.

Now, I will comment on a public policy, which resulted in Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University (MSU) collaborating in offering degree programs geared toward the needs of community colleges in Mississippi and neighboring states. This is an instance where the governing

boards of the two higher education systems in Mississippi—State Institutions of Higher Learning (four-year state institutions) and the Community College System—through research under a Ford Foundation grant and a Phil Hardin Foundation grant came together. They developed working collaborations between four-year universities and community colleges to meet a unique educational need of the community colleges for new faculty and administrators to be trained to effectively work in community colleges, particularly rural ones.

Two graduate degree programs, a doctorate in community college leadership and a Master of Science in workforce education leadership, were developed in phase I, which was to build the capacity of ASU and MSU to meet the needs of rural community colleges. Recently, another joint degree, the Master of Arts in teaching for community college instruction, was approved and the Master of Science in technology management is being developed. The academic programs jointly are sponsored by MSU and ASU. The degree programs are designed for students currently working in community colleges and in workforce training programs. This public policy also allows the two state universities to collaborate with each other in our agricultural research and Extension programs. I will address these programs later. Community college teachers who already possess a master's degree may earn a certificate in community college teaching by completing 12 hours of specialized courses.

Through the leveraging of foundation dollars, a federal grant was obtained for phase II of the partnership, which is enhancing the capacities of Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University to further strengthen the (organization) MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges. More specifically, the partnership is incorporating cooperative Extension into its activities, strengthening relationships with the leadership of community colleges through professional development and technical assistance, and conducting a comprehensive study of public, legislative, and local policies that impact the

development of critical leadership that the community colleges address in meeting the needs of local communities. In addition to working closely with the Alcorn State University Cooperative Extension Program and the Mississippi State University Extension Service, the partnership also works closely with the Southern Rural Development Center, which is housed at Mississippi State University.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The literature is replete with studies on public policy related to rural communities and on factors affecting and/or related to community and economic development. According to Mark Drabentstott, director of the Center for the Study of Rural America and others: "Ten policy experts and 250 rural leaders from throughout the nation who met in Kansas City for the Center for the Study of Rural America's Second Annual Conference [April 30-May 1, 2001] on rural matters suggested that "the United States needs a new rural policy." According to Drabentstott and others, "Perhaps the most challenging discussion at the conference centered on building a new overall framework for rural policy and a new slate of policy options."

In a paper by the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), published by MDC Inc. in September 2001, the observation is made that: "In recent decades, global economic forces and technological changes have caused many rural communities to lose their historic job base of mining, farming, timber, or low-wage manufacturing." The paper goes on to indicate that distressed rural regions are diverse racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically. Low education levels seem to be a characteristic of the regions. This means that, in general, rural communities tend to experience low levels of educational, economic, and leadership development. Deficiencies in these areas tend to lead to or at least inhibit or slow down development in other areas, which are essential to economically viable and sustainable communities. We must now

consider some opportunities for public policy that would benefit rural America, especially as related to community and economic development, with higher education serving as a partner in the process.

EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE TRAINING

State colleges and universities must have the flexibility of developing programs and services to meet the needs of the community without undue restriction from their governing boards. This includes the offering of degree programs when applicable. A case in point is the instance where Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University collaborated to offer a Master of Arts in community college teaching (as an outcome of the MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges) to meet the needs of community colleges in Mississippi and neighboring states. Since Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University are land-grant institutions, their cooperative Extension program is intricately involved in the partnership. It is also important to point out that Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University, through voluntary policy and agreements, jointly have been preparing plans of work for their agricultural research and Extension programs for many years. Therefore, their collaboration with the rural community colleges is consistent with their local public policy.

Public policy on workforce training must be visionary and strategic. No longer can community colleges and four-year institutions train current and potential workers simply to fill existing employment opportunities. Public policy must reflect strategic thinking in a futuristic manner. Consequently, such public policy must make it possible for colleges to make investments in training programs to prepare individuals for employment opportunities that are likely to be available in two or so years down the road and market this new training to out-of-the-area potential employers. Public policy on workforce training tends to focus on

meeting the immediate workforce needs of the now, rather than creating critical mass of trained workers that may attract potential employers—even though there is a belief that employers are attracted to regions where a skilled workforce is available.

Workforce training and public policy in rural communities also must have the flexibility of preparing entrepreneurs, rather than the tendency of preparing people to work for others. Such public policy must allow for thinking out of the box and should enable individuals to obtain training without necessarily having to demonstrate that there are employment opportunities available at the end of the training. Such thinking out of the box must be rooted in the belief that a critical mass of properly trained individuals will attract employers to the area or the trained individuals will create their own employment opportunities. Because some individuals like to live in rural areas and with advanced technologies, public policy should make it possible for individuals to physically locate in rural communities while they are working for companies in urban and/or suburban areas. This change would reduce traffic congestion in cities, reduce fuel consumption, and reduce pollution in urban areas resulting from the burning of petrochemicals. In summary, new public policy on education and workforce training could have a positive impact on rural communities.

Public policy should encourage and facilitate collaboration, shared facility use, and partnership between institutions of higher education and K-12 schools. This should include adequate public funding to support the activities of such collaborations. For example, one of the most successful partnerships at Alcorn State University is our Saturday Science Academy for middle school students. We found that middle school students are not doing well in the sciences and mathematics, so we established an agreement with neighborhood school systems to offer hands-on science and math programs for approximately 100 students each year

on Saturday at the university campus. The program, which was funded by a federal grant, has been highly successful so far.

LAND-USE PLANNING (ZONING)

A significant challenge in many rural communities is the lack of proper land-use planning or zoning regulations. Such lack of land-use planning prevents the orderly development of commercial property versus residential areas. It is, therefore, not uncommon to see a few residential houses interspersed in an area that contains commercial businesses and in a way retards the further development and/or expansion of the commercial businesses. Similarly, the reverse is often observed when inappropriate small commercial businesses are interspersed in a residential area and essentially become blighted (a liability) rather than an asset to the residential area. Consequently, there is an urgent need for public policy relative to land-use planning in rural communities. No individual wants to build a fine home and then months later discover that a pig or poultry farm is being established next door. Conversely, no individual wants to establish a manufacturing plant, only to find that months later the property owner next door builds a fine home and starts complaining about the odor from the plant.

In many instances, it is difficult, if not virtually impossible, to get local elected officials to address the issue of land-use planning (zoning). Many elected officials are more concerned with winning the next election, rather than with making hard decisions that would ultimately foster and promote sustainable community and economic development in rural communities. Public policy could encourage the development of industrial parks, residential areas, and recreational areas in ways that would complement one another. This is a must for rural communities. The pride of rugged individualism must cease.

TRANSPORTATION

It is a well-known fact that adequate transportation is essential for the economic development of any area, yet, there seems to be a lack of public policy relative to transportation in rural communities. Public policy should ensure that federal and state funds are used in building and maintaining highways and roadways that will benefit rural communities. Such public policy must be intentional—taking into consideration the big picture—that rural communities are part of America and should benefit from the nation's rich resources. In other words, rural communities, in general, do not have the influence with their state legislatures and with federal agencies, as do the affluent urban and suburban areas. Therefore, unless there are intentional public policies to develop/maintain highways and roadways to serve these communities, they are likely to be “left behind.”

In addition to highways and roadways, public policy also should address the need for public transportation in rural communities. For example, public schools and community colleges provide transportation for students from strategic points in communities to and from these institutions. However, this is seldom the case for students attending four-year colleges and universities. If such transportation were provided by public support or a combination of private and public support, it would certainly increase the accessibility of four-year college education to economically disadvantaged students in rural communities.

Public policy relative to transportation in rural communities also should address the elderly, physically disabled, and low-income individuals who need transportation for work and so forth. Some of the aforementioned services are provided to some extent in some rural communities; however, public policy should encourage and foster adequate services as appropriate.

COMMUNICATION/INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Rural communities did not obtain extensive sustainable benefits from the industrial revolution and the manufacturing era. They were left behind. This concept of “left behind rural communities” will occur in the informational technology era unless purposeful and intentional public policies are developed and implemented to ensure that these communities participate in the information technology revolution. Providing rural America with a technology infrastructure rapidly can help close the “remote” location gap because all data is instantaneous regardless of locale. Rural areas could become great hubs for electronic outsourcing.

As pointed out in the section on workforce preparation, one does not have to reside in urban or suburban areas to be employed in occupations that require the use of high technology. Consequently, public policy should encourage and facilitate rural communities’ access to high information technology as a means of communication, as well as a medium for employment and economic development. Public policy may provide incentives to businesses that seek to use rural communities in the information technology arena similarly to how incentives are provided to businesses in the manufacturing arena. ASU is working with local leaders in southwest Mississippi to develop a digital imaging high technology industry in the region to replace rapidly closing smoke stack industries. It is important to note that ASU and Copiah-Lincoln Community College have built a joint campus in Natchez, Miss., to lead the way in establishing a new economy in the area. Policy-wise, we want to set the pace to spur local government.

HEALTH CARE AND RECREATION

The application of some publicly supported health care programs does not promote pro-active health maintenance or early intervention in the case of illness.

Consequently, many rural residents wait until they have emergency situations before seeking medical assistance. Ultimately, emergency situations are more costly than preventive care/health maintenance, early detection, and treatment. Public policy should encourage and facilitate health maintenance and early illness detection and treatment to reduce the actual cost of health and collateral costs related to missed work and school for the patients, as well as family members.

Public policy could provide incentives for health care facilities, which are successful in health maintenance and sickness prevention, rather than on curing illnesses in rural communities. Research has shown that there is a close relationship between lack of physical activities and some health conditions, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes. This is particularly true with the elderly in rural areas. Often in rural areas, there are little to no recreational facilities, and roadways are not constructed with sidewalks that encourage recreational walking or jogging.

Because physical activities are so important to people’s health, public policy should encourage and facilitate opportunities for physical activities in rural communities. For example, incentives (e.g., tax breaks) may be provided to businesses that construct recreational facilities that are accessible to their employees and to other members of the community. Public policy also may encourage public institutions to make their recreational facilities accessible to members of the community, including those who may be physically challenged. Public policy may provide public funds for physical activity training and supervision. Again, by way of example, the university is using a federal highway grant to create a four-mile bike path around campus and connecting to the federal Natchez Trace, which is four miles from campus, to encourage rural physical fitness.

NORTH AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is one public policy that has been strongly praised and equally criticized. Interestingly, both praises and criticisms come from people in the United States and in South America. Public policy must ensure that NAFTA is beneficial to rural communities, including to small farmers and small businesses, rather than a liability to them. Objective studies must be done to find ways of enhancing the beneficial attributes of NAFTA to rural communities while minimizing negative consequences. Public policy should accentuate the positive impact on rural communities.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Homeland security has potential and significant ramifications for rural communities. As urban and suburban areas become increasingly more secured and protected, potential terrorists may see rural communities as “good” targets. Consequently, there is a need for public policy that reflects concern for homeland security in rural communities. Public policy also may be geared toward enabling rural communities to be prepared to provide services to the nation in case of disruptions in urban and suburban communities because of terrorists. Such public policy may, in fact, promote some level of economic development in rural communities. Public policy also must be in place to ensure that children attending schools in rural communities have places of safety in case of threats or actual terrorist activities. Public policy must ensure that farms, food-processing facilities, water supplies, and other necessities in rural communities have the highest measure of safety that is practical.

CONCLUSION

The suggested public policies cited above are in place to some degree in some rural communities; however, a more collaborative and comprehensive approach is needed to ensure that all rural communities have opportunities to benefit from the collective resources of this great nation, including through training institutes for rural leaders and policymakers. There is no shortage of resources in the United States to make rural communities viable and sustainable. The question is whether elected officials at all levels (local, state, regional, and federal) have the vision and intestinal fortitude to develop and implement public policy that, in the long run, will benefit rural communities and, by extension, benefit the nation and the global society. I think they will if we insist and persist. Furthermore, if this paper raises questions among professionals and scholars, I will have achieved my goal.